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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/I. NSC FOR PHEE AND VROOMAN.

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2019

TAGS: [IR](#) [IZ](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: PUBLIC CONDEMNATION OF CORRUPTION AND POVERTY ON  
THE SIDELINES OF ASHURA COMMEMORATION IN KARBALA

Classified By: A/DCM GARY A. GRAPPO FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: According to press and GOI reports, over three million Shi'a pilgrims commemorated the holy day of Ashura in Karbala on December 27. While the Washington Post and some Iraqi media outlets reported a significant anti-government protest in Karbala during Ashura processions, contacts who were present told PRT and Embassy that there was no significant, visible anti-government fervor during Ashura events in Karbala. However, they noted many banners criticizing parliament and the government for failing to address corruption and calling on them to "uphold the values of Imam Hussein." During the upcoming campaign season, it is likely that public gatherings in Iraq such as this, religious and secular, will serve as fora for those with political grievances and specific concerns. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

12. (C) The Washington Post and Iraqi media reported December 28 that the commemoration of Ashura in the Shi'a shrine city of Karbala on December 27 attracted a significant anti-government protest. Iraqi press noted that some of the banners and signs carried during the Ashura procession condemned the Iranian occupation of the Fakkah oil field, as well as criticized the disproportionate wealth of those in the Iraqi government relative to the suffering of the average Iraqi citizen. Despite press reports that protests specifically criticized the government of Prime Minister Maliki, local contacts present in Karbala told PRToffs that they did not observe anti-government protests. (Comment: Given the size of Ashura observances in Karbala, with crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands, it is feasible that even a relatively sizeable group of protesters could go unnoticed. End Comment.)

3.(C) A locally employed staff member of PRT Karbala who was present near the Shrines in Karbala on December 27 relayed that he did not witness any anti-government demonstrations and did not discern a crowd of 5,000 protesters (as reported by the Washington Post). Locally engaged staff of a U.S. NGO grantee (protect) in Karbala reported that they had seen no specific demonstrations against the Iraqi government, but acknowledged to poloff that such a protest could have occurred without their seeing it given the size of crowds. One staff member reported seeing marchers chanting against government officials that do not honor the memory of Imam Hussein, and calling on leaders to stop "oppressing the people" and "living in corruption."

14. (C/NF) Mustafa al-Kadhimi (strictly protect), director of an Iraqi NGO who maintains strong ties to clerics in Najaf and Karbala, told poloffs December 28 that similarly-themed

protests occurred in 2008 on the margins of Ashura, though at a smaller scale. He believed they were orchestrated by the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) as an opening salvo to their election campaign. A staffer close to ISCI Chairman Ammar al-Hakim acknowledged to poloff that he had heard reporting of the protests, but did not have details and noted that such protests were not a typical occurrence during Ashura observances.

5.(C) Comment: Historically, Ashura is a politically charged religious observance; however, Ashura celebrations were prohibited in Iraq under the Saddam regime. This year marks the first time since the fall of the regime that Ashura observances took place without U.S. forces present in Iraqi cities, which, combined with their timing at the start of the campaign period prior to Iraqi national election, could explain the political undertones in Karbala. The grievances heard in Karbala appear to have targeted government corruption and economic conditions in general, rather than a blatant attack on the Maliki government. End Comment.  
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